

## JOHN HENRY BRITTS—PHYSICIAN AND FOSSIL HUNTER

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In 1899 the United States Geological Survey published a classical volume on the Carboniferous fossil plants of the western Missouri region. The author of this work is the late David White, a noted and able geologist and paleobotanist, while behind the scenes, contributing the fossil plants that made it possible, worked a country physician of Clinton, Missouri, Dr. John Henry Britts.

The daily routine of Dr. Britts' life appears to have been no less crowded than is usual for men in his profession, although it was somewhat more colorful, judging from the variety and scope of his undertakings. In addition to his successful medical practice he found considerable time to serve the state in capacities of very lasting benefit. One of the most significant of these is the part he played in revealing the floral splendor of Missouri as it existed some 250 million years ago. But before mentioning in detail these more purely scientific achievements it may be well to briefly sketch in the background of his earlier life.

John Henry Britts was the eldest, and only son, of six children born to his parents, George Mathias Britts and Mary Jane Rogers Britts. His great-grandfather, Adam Britts, emigrated to this country from Germany about 1754, settled in Franklin County, Pennsylvania, and later moved to Virginia about the time of the Revolution. George M. Britts moved from Virginia with his parents apparently at about the turn of the 19th century and located at Ladoga, Indiana. He studied medicine and practiced in Parke and Montgomery counties until the year 1842. The son, John Henry Britts, was born November 1, 1836, in Montgomery County, Indiana. He attended the state schools until the age of 19, when he began the study of medicine. At that time he went to live with his maternal grandfather, Dr. Henry Rogers, with whom he remained until the spring of 1857, when he moved with his family to Clinton, Missouri. He then resumed his study under the preceptorship of his uncle, Dr. John A. Rogers, and during the college year 1857-58 attended lectures at the St. Louis Medical College. It is thus quite evident that he hailed from a family in which the medical tradition was well established, and in view of the scientific interests that he displayed through life it is not surprising that he followed this course at the outset. His formal training certainly was not extensive as compared with modern concepts, yet his learned relatives imparted to young Britts a sound and comprehensive scientific foundation, judging from the success and distinction that he later achieved.

Shortly after Dr. Britts began the practice of medicine in Cass County in 1859 Governor Jackson issued a call for troops to repel the Federal invasion of Missouri. Britts responded and proceeded to raise a company of which he was made Captain. Six months later he joined General Price's army at Springfield and helped to organize Waldo P. Johnson's battalion, which became later a part of the Fourth Infantry Regiment of the Confederate States Army. Dr. Britts was made surgeon of the

regiment with the rank of Major, later being promoted to Brigade Surgeon. On June 9, 1863, while on duty at the City Hospital during the siege of Vicksburg, he was wounded by a shell thrown into the city by Porter's fleet, and it was found necessary to amputate his right leg. The following August he left Vicksburg, a paroled prisoner, and after his recovery served as surgeon in Alabama and Georgia until the end of the War. Upon his return to Clinton in 1865 Dr. Britts formed a professional partnership with Dr. P. S. Jennings which lasted until the death of the latter thirty years later.

Dr. Britts' practice, like that of most physicians working in small cities and towns, extended over a wide territory. It was this frequent local travelling, combined with an intense scientific curiosity, that made possible the accumulation of his collections of fossil plants. At that time many coal mines were operating in Henry County and the adjacent territory, and Dr. Britts often visited them. Along with his medical kit, he always carried in his buggy a bag of tools, including pick and hammers, to carve out a few choice specimens from the shales that the coal miners laid aside for his study.

In addition to the numerous specimens that he furnished to private individuals and public institutions a large collection of Dr. Britts' fossils were placed many years ago in the Chicago Academy of Science's Museum. Mr. Eliot C. Williams, Jr., has kindly given me the following information concerning these specimens:

"The accession record shows that on May 12, 1904, the Academy received a collection of 1124 coal plants collected by Dr. John H. Britts, in Missouri and Pennsylvania. This gift was made by Mr. Francis Peabody. A notation in the accession record states that the collection contains many types.

"I have checked on the collection, and it seems to be in good shape, but I did not count to see whether or not there are still 1124. I would judge that the collection is probably intact.

"A label in one of the cases indicates that this collection was the basis for Monograph #37 of the U. S. Geological Survey on the Fossil Flora of the Lower Coal Measures of Missouri, by David White." (Letter dated July 18, 1946.)

Dr. Roland W. Brown has informed me that the U. S. National Museum houses approximately 1,000 of Dr. Britts' specimens from the Missouri Coal Measures. Many of these are type and figured specimens. I have not had occasion to study these two important collections of American Carboniferous plants, although it is believed that paleobotanists working in this field would be glad to know of their whereabouts. Apparently the two collections contain all of the types in the above-mentioned Monograph.

Following the publication of the Missouri Monograph Dr. Britts continued collecting plants from the coal mines. Most of the specimens composing this later collection were acquired during or shortly prior to 1904. It was through the kind offices of Mr. D. K. Greger, formerly a curator of paleontology at Washington University, that the existence of this collection was brought to my attention some eight years ago. At that time it was in the possession of a grandson of Dr. Britts, Mr. J. B. Owen of Clinton, from whom it was later purchased for Washington University in St. Louis. It is not a large collection, but a considerable

portion of the specimens are of exquisite beauty both in their preservation and scientific and teaching value. It is especially rich in fine examples of *Asterophyllites* and *Annularia*.

Most of the mines from which these fossils were acquired have long since closed, and it is questionable whether it will ever again be possible to continue where Dr. Britts left off. At least we have a reasonably representative selection of the plant fossils from his old hunting grounds which will always serve as an invaluable foundation for such paleobotanical studies as may be carried on in that region. Our knowledge of Carboniferous floras is increasing every year as new regions are opened up and old ones reworked, and it is largely through the efforts of such active amateur workers that this knowledge is forthcoming.

Thanks are due Mr. John B. Owen for placing at my disposal biographical data pertaining to his grandfather.